Boogie Man

Danny McCue Interviews John Lee Hooker

By the time John Lee Hooker, then a largely unknown guitar player from Clarksdale, Mississippi, showed up at a Detroit recording studio on November 3rd, 1948, both the musician and the public were ready for a change.

He was a janitor in an automobile plant by day. At night he'd play in local joints until closing. His forte, loudly amplified and melodically sparse compositions that went by such names as "Crawlin' King Snake," "I'm In The Mood" and "Boogie Chillin'."

What made Hooker remarkable in his time, what gave his work the unique imprint that people call 'style,' was the way in which he stripped all of his songs down to pure rhythm. You'd never whistle a Hooker tune, but you'd remember the way it made you move.

Years later, a youthful Bob Dylan would open for Hooker at Gerde's Folk City in Manhattan. It was the Minnesotan's New York debut. The Rolling Stones would pull similar duty on his subsequent tour of their native British Isles. In all, a generation of musicians, from Eric Clapton and Led Zeppelin to Robert Cray and Stevie Ray Vaughan, would cut their artistic teeth on his tunes.

We spoke to John Lee Hooker from his home outside San Francisco. A few days earlier he'd been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

CS: You're often referred to as 'the first recorded practitioner of electric blues.' When you first went in to record, did you have any trouble transferring your sound to record?

JH: No, but then the gear they had then is nothing like they've got now. It wasn't a lot of trouble. It wasn't a cakewalk, but it wasn't too bad.

CS: Were you surprised at all about how you sounded on record?

JH: I thought, 'Oh boy, that's sounding good.' Because of the electric guitar, you know? I just plugged in and played and it sounded just like I was in heaven someplace.

CS: Did becoming a record maker effect the way you played live?

JH: Well, yes, quite naturally. When you're in clubs, you're real loose, just doing anything you want to do. If you make a mistake, you don't have to fix it. In the studio you're a little more uptight because you want everything just right. Once it gets out there, you can't bring it back in and change it. In concert you can holler out loud, sing low, miss a beat and just go, but if you missed a beat in the studio in the old days, it was on there forever.

CS: OK, but...

JH: You understand what I'm saying...

CS: Yeah. Now, if you feel uptight in the studio, how do you loosen yourself up?

JH: That's a good question because it happens all the time, not only to me, but to a lot of recording artists. When you first go in the studio, it's like being a pitcher in the bullpen — you've got to warm up. You've got to get the feeling. It's hard to just go in and sit down and really go to it. A few times I've done it. I did it when we made my album The Healer a few years ago, but we had been messing around [beforehand], you know what I mean? Then we went in and did the album in one, maybe two takes.

CS: Do they keep you pretty confined when you're doing your uptempo things, or do they let you move around and swing with it in the studio?

JH: You can move around with it, jump to it, as long as you keep the beat and keep playing. You can rock while you sit there, but don't get off mic while you're singing. You can't be just bouncing around when you're doing something like that.

CS: Do you approach uptempo numbers differently than you do your moodier pieces?

JH: Yes I do. When I'm doing a fast song I make sure I start off real hot, so that the people who are listening feel they've got something they can boogie by. To do that you've got to make sure you really hit it hard, strong and hot, so that when people hear it they're going to jump up and start moving. In other words, you can't drag the beginning. On slow songs you usually play in such a way that it's not possible for the dancers to pick up on a beat. When it's uptempo, you want it so hot that they jump right up out of their seats and dance.

CS: What kind of advice did producers give you when you started making records? Did anybody ever try to tell you how to do your thing, and how did you respond?

JH: I don't respond to them. I know how to do my own thing. Most of them

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knew how I did it. Most of them know I don't want a lot of talking to them, or a lot of recommendations to do this or that, because I get nervous. They get me real nervous because I'm used to doing it my way and not theirs. Leave me alone. I'll not when I get that groove and it's hot.

CS: Anything unexpected ever happen to you in a recording studio?

JH: Probably did, but I can't recall.

CS: Do you write in the studio?

JH: Yeah, I can. Right on the spot. Boom, I go in there and don't have nothing and I can come out with a hit.

CS: What inspires you to sit down and write a number?

JH: It's just a gift and a talent. When I was about twelve years old I realized I was born with talent.

CS: Which of your recorded performances do you think best captures your style?

JH: So many stand out for me. "Boogie Chillin'," "Boom Boom," "Dimples," so many of them. "Boogie Chillin'" is where the boogie came from. That stands up the best of all the boogie tunes.

CS: Has the success of younger players like Robert Cray changed the blues?

JH: No, I don't think so. The blues are bigger this year than they've ever been. Robert Cray is not all blues. It's blues, but it's R&B blues. He ain't blues like I do. It's a different style.

CS: Do you listen to contemporary things, like rap, at all?

JH: No. Not at all. I wont criticize it, but I don't listen to it.

CS: What do you think it is that causes people to respond to your sound like they do?

JH: The beat. I have a beat that no other guitar player has. I have a beat that can go right through you whether you're sad or lonely or feeling good. And my voice is really mellow. It gets right down to them. I don't play a lot of fancy guitar, I wouldn't want to. I just pick this funky guitar, with this beautiful drive and this big sound; that's what stands out.